

## Contemporaneity of Modernism as an Aesthetic Innovation

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### Abstract

Modernism as a literary movement can be periodized from the point of literary history where postmodernism follows modernism. However, modernism as an aesthetic innovation was ever-present in so-called postmodernism and is present in the contemporary literary world. In other words, because of modernism's open-ended nature as an aesthetic innovation as well as the essential presence of newness in the term, the contemporary is forced to rely on modernism as the frame that can help it define its own identity. Contemporary authors reveal their relationship with modernism and contemporary literature demonstrates the recurring presence of modernism even beyond historical periodization. As a stylistic mode, modernism becomes more dominant in the contemporary. In today's neoliberal capitalism, key components of modernist thinking and art reappear in contemporary situations to serve a specific purpose. Thus, modernism is not a closed movement of the past but is a recurring presence in the contemporary literary world as an aesthetic intervention. This paper through the conceptual analysis of the term as well as its usage, investigates the contemporaneity of modernism to comprehend how modernism is not only back or can be said to have resurfaced, but also how modernism is ever present as an aesthetic innovation in contemporary literature.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Contemporary, Contemporaneity, Modernism, Post-modernism, Residual modernism.

### Introduction

In the history of the evolution of the English language, the word 'modern' is used to distinguish modern English from Middle English. In literature, this word is used to mark a period. The term, 'modern' is generally used to refer to the avant-garde and this sense of radical, progressive or even revolutionary tone has core inside the usage of 'Modernism'. In this sense, it refers back to the 1960s (1). In the historical marking of aesthetic movements, 'modernism' is generally considered to be between 1914 and 1945. From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, modernism encouraged innovation in literature and art, especially in the years after the First World War. In the sixteenth century, the term 'modern' started to be used to denote the transition from medieval and ancient ages, and it became somewhat identical to 'now'(2). The Modernist movement finds expression in a multitude of literary works, driven by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and the quest for a genuine reaction to a drastically altered reality. Though modernist literature includes works by authors such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad before the First World War, modernism is most commonly linked

to the postwar era. Humans' confidence in the basic principles of Western society and culture was shaken by the war's immensity, and postwar Modernist writing expressed a sense of disillusionment and fragmentation (3). The modernists' rejection of the moral standards of the society they lived in is the overarching characteristic of modernism. They rejected traditional morality because they saw it to be arbitrary, conformist, and an attempt at controlling people's emotions. The world was changing so swiftly due to scientific and technical advancements that culture had to constantly reinvent itself to stay up to date with modernity and avoid looking out of date. Due to the new dynamics of technology, modernists were always on the lookout for new ideas and were reluctant to commit to a single framework that would ultimately suffocate and destroy creativity. As a result of their attempts to stay up with the theoretical and technological advancements that were completely altering the structure of existence, the arts were now starting to defy convention (4). Modernist poets, generally disapproved of 19th-century formulaic poetry and

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clear-cut narrative. Rather, a large number of them conveyed a fragmented narrative that mirrored the dispersed character of society both during and after the First World War. Many Modernist poets used free verse and incorporated elements from different countries and civilizations. Some authors employed multiple points of view or even a 'stream-of-consciousness' writing technique. These writing styles go on to show how the scattered character of society influenced authors' output throughout that era (5).

According to Robin G. Schulze, modernism is a literary response to the technological, economic, and demographic changes that brought rise to the modern world. The changes in society brought about by modernity are represented by modernism, which is the literary world's explosion of creative innovation in reaction to these developments (6). For Jeff Wallace, modernism is more of a retrospective categorization for grouping several movements, objects, artists, thinkers, and cultural practices, some of whom may have been startled to be lumped together under the banner of modernism. It is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of inventive and experimental activities in literature, the visual and decorative arts, music, film, design, and architecture from 1880 to 1939 (7). However, modernism as an aesthetic innovation was ever-present in so-called postmodernism and is present in the contemporary literary world.

By analysing the term Peter Osborne states that the idea of the modern entails a perception of the present as 'new'. It selects new things from the present and incorporates them into its historical meaning, or what we might call 'the historical present.' As a result of this temporal logic of negation, which splits the present from within, the term 'modern' is inherently subjective, value-laden, and critical. In the modern, what is new within the present not only demands more attention than what is not new; it increasingly undermines the latter's claim to define the present itself (8). As a result, an understanding of modernism's contemporaneity aims to show how modernism is not just back or can be said to have resurfaced. Rather, we want to emphasise how modernism plays an important role in the larger attempt to critically connect with our present as

history (9). In other words, because of modernism's open-ended nature as an aesthetic innovation as well as the essential presence of newness in the term, the contemporary is forced to rely on modernism as the frame that can help it define its own identity.

Given its open-ended character, on one hand, the contemporary is forced to resort to modernism as the sole frame that can help it define its own identity. Both modernism and the contemporary rely on suggesting a new fault line. However, as modernism gives way to the contemporary, this sense of the new shifts. With its statement of disruption and invention, modernist self-presentation makes any subsequent gesture problematic. The self-conscious lateness of a contemporary after the modern lends itself to recursive returns or a reflexive problematizing of modernism's formal focus. The contemporary still defines itself against modernism, relations that take the form of rejection, supersession, or continuance (10). Thus, modernism is not a closed movement of the past but is a recurring presence in the contemporary literary world as an aesthetic intervention. Besides, contemporary authors, despite theoreticians' attempts to bury modernism in the confines of rigid chronological or geographical locations reveal their relationship with modernism, and contemporary literature shows the continued living presence of modernism. This paper investigates the contemporaneity of modernism to comprehend how modernism is not only back or can be said to have resurfaced, but how modernism is ever present in contemporary literature.

## Material and Methods

The descriptive-analytical method is used in the study. The materials collected are published works available online to a great extent. These materials are fetched through the Web of Science, Scopus Index, and Google Scholar platforms. The rest of them are availed from The National Library of India, Kolkata, India. The collected data are critically analysed and logically argued to draw the conclusions.

## Results and Discussion

The term 'modernism' includes a wide variety of movements that are subversive to realism or romanticism and inclined towards abstraction such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism,

Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. However, these are not all of the same type of movement, and some are radical counter-movements to others (11). Rebecca L. Walkowitz defines modernism as “involving strategies that respond to and engage with the experience of modernity” (12). Modernism remains an event in contemporary culture because of the great influence of the first thirty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (13). Eugene Lunn conceives self-reflexiveness, montage, paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty along with dehumanization and the demise of subjectivity as unified, integrated, and self-consistent as the most important features of modernism (14).

Wallace cautions against using such lists as a checklist to assess an artefact's modernist credentials. Using them as a checklist to assess an artefact's modernist credentials would be putting the cart before the horse. For him, modernism does not exist anywhere except in the infinitely varied forms that have given rise to it only as a subsequent general description. He observes that Lunn's list captures modernism as a very specific cultural phenomenon inside the much broader historical movement known as modernity. He asserts that modernism continues through postmodernism. By quoting the statement of influential German thinker Jurgen Habermas that the 'project of modernity' is far from over, Wallace argues that it is too early to proclaim the death of modernism at the hands of a condition of contemporaneity we now refer to as 'postmodernism' (7). Though the historical process of modernity can be periodized and compartmentalized, the cultural forms of that historical process show its characteristics of contemporariness. Theodore Martin referring to Wallace points out a problem with the term, 'contemporary' itself. It is a periodizing term that is not quite periodizing, a historical measure that is not tied to a specific literary or historical epoch (15).

Contemporary trends interact with modernism in a variety of ways. Brian McHale's study shows that modernism and postmodernism with seemingly similar narrative devices and styles highlighted different orientations toward self and world. Though the periods shared many devices and themes, such as fragmentation and self-

conscious formalism, the distinction was a shift from an internal to an external inclination. Modernist fiction investigated interior experience by representing embodied consciousness. The epistemology of modernist fiction was epistemological and knowledge-oriented. Postmodernism, on the other hand, was ontological. The world was not taken for granted as a backdrop against which the adventures of consciousness could be played out in postmodernist fiction, but rather as an object of reflection and contestation. Postmodernism multiplied and juxtaposed worlds, perplexing and volatilizing them. Modernism and postmodernism differ in their orientations, with modernism's centripetal drive for inward strategies versus postmodernism's centrifugal inclination with its openness to the world outside and beyond consciousness (16). Modernism, according to Matthew Hart, seeps into the present while also pushing back into nineteenth-century specialities. He affirms that we have not yet escaped modernity. Modernist studies now occasionally overreach, particularly in its globalist or transnational variants (17).

McGurl's study states that contemporary fiction is only an official expression of modernism, transforming literary experiments into house style for creative writing programmes. Those connected with such programmes write fiction that stands apart from popular fiction and applies these strategies to a variety of minority cultures, combining the ethnic voice's uniqueness with the heightened idiom of literary modernism. These advances contribute to the partial democratisation of modernism, transforming it from an elite literary practice to one open to anyone who has academic instruction in the field. Thus, contemporary literature culture as 'reflexive modernity', appears to be the essential foundation of a cultural logic that stimulates continuous self-evaluation and self-reflection (18). Amy Hungerford calls the era after 1945 a 'long modernism' and states that formally can be called the contemporary era (19). Postmodernist interpretations are the most eloquent expressions of how modernism interacts with contemporary literature. Trimm's study asserts that modernism makes its presence more prominent in the contemporary as a stylistic mode since

postmodernism continues within the contemporary (10).

D'Arcy and Nilges claim that if postmodernism is defined as a move away from modernist investments in time and temporality, then the revived interest in literary output during the previous two decades indicates not just a return to a part of modernist philosophy in time and temporality, but also a move away from the postmodern. In this context, the comeback of the *Zeitroman* (the time novel), which is deeply invested in questions of time, presence, and contemporaneity can be used as an example. The *Zeitroman*, a quintessentially modernist novel genre along with the Bildungsroman, historical novel, and Gesellschaftsroman (social novel), has resurfaced as a major role in current novelistic creation. Even iconic postmodernists like Thomas Pynchon (*Against the Day*) and Don DeLillo (*Cosmopolis and Point Omega*) have recently embraced *Zeitroman*. Thus, they argue that modernism's contemporaneity is more than just a case of the retro or nostalgic mode that has long been associated with postmodernism. Instead, key aspects of modernist thought and art resurface in entirely contemporary contexts to serve a specific purpose in the present, namely, to think through present culture's self-imposed impasses, particularly the perceived inability to imagine the new or an alternative to the current stage of neoliberal capitalism (9).

Modernism notably offers a hostile self-articulation in its statement of novelty, one that marks division from all that preceded it. Paul de Man states that modernity places its faith in the strength of the present moment as an origin, but it quickly realises that by isolating itself from the past, it has also isolated itself from the present. As a result, modernism serves to disrupt, making it insecure and antagonistic (20). Inability to connect to earlier sources of one's own identity and a need to move away from what comprises one's own present characterise newness, particularly that marshalled around a self-imposed imperative to innovate. If modernism is an impossible endeavour, then the contemporary is positioned as the aftermath of such a contentious event, a modernity that is divided against itself (10). Modernism is not only a rupture with the tradition but it is also characterized by an eternal action of internal

ruptures and fragmentations within itself (21). The internal ruptures and fragmentation and the antagonistic nature make modernism ever-present.

Eysteinnsson and Liska state that modernism, far from being a dominant master discourse, continues to reveal its opposing and subversive powers through the various shapes of its newer figurations and continues to challenge mainstream manifestations of aesthetic, social, and political culture. The concept of modernism's dominance has meaning in the sense that it is a pressing issue, and the concept of modernism is regarded as a vital link to salient aesthetic, ideological, and historical issues that have yet to be resolved (22). Bradbury and Mcfarlane observe that though modernism can be considered as the great divide that happened between past and present or art before and art now, there is no agreement regarding the nature of the new situation on the form and character of art (11). There are criticisms of using the term, 'modernism' as a unitary movement of style which has got a set of unique dependent concepts. Felski notes that "the modernity that is often caricatured as synonymous with a totalizing logic of identity reveals on closer examination a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that cannot be easily synthesized into a single, unified ideology or world-view" (23). The multiplicity of voices and perspectives adds to open-ended modernism.

The term modernity as the most commonly used term to describe the period of human history, the point at which human was able to reject other forms of domination and assert his/her own independence. It is marked by reason, which propels history onward. Thus, it is a teleological process, a forward movement marked by a firm conviction in progress and the belief that the present represents the most advanced state of human endeavour surpassed by the future. As a result, modernism can be understood as a reaction to modernity and the concept of the contemporary (24). Michael Jones while studying contemporary realist political novels presents literary modernism as an ambivalent touchstone when developing fresh perspectives (25). In his study *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, David James examines texts by Michael Ondaatje, J.M.

Coetzee, Ian McEwan, and Toni Morrison, arguing contemporary writers are treating their literary inheritances in the same way that many modernists did while continuing to experiment with form (26). Xiaobing Tang uses the notion of 'residual modernism' as the ideology of modernism to discuss some contemporary Chinese literary production, especially the avant-garde fiction that is very often celebrated as postmodern (27).

Trimm citing David James' study as an example, claims that contemporary writers demonstrate the potential for modernist fiction to be more than just a laboratory for examining consciousness as a hermetic domain, incorporating techniques for demonstrating how mental experiences are shaped by material circumstances. Over the twentieth century, fiction has moved away from the dichotomy of centripetal interiority and centrifugal exteriority, instead focusing on the interweaving of epistemological and ontological interrogations. According to him, such re-engagements refashion not only our understanding of modernism but also what it means to be contemporary (10).

Contemporary writers overlook modernism's dialectical relationship to tradition. Fiction today involves an interaction between innovation and inheritance that is entirely consistent with what modernists themselves were doing more than a century ago, an interaction that allows writers to work with their lineage while attempting new form experiments. In light of Raymond William's work, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, David James confirms that modernism has passed - what was once considered so artistically daring has now become culturally reified. As a result, modernism is not only a period in literary history that can only be appreciated in retrospect, but it also serves as a reminder that the innovations of what is known as Modernism have become the new but fixed forms of our day (28). Jinglin Wu's study highlights that modernistic unfamiliar forms of artistic expression have given current graphic design a fresh lease on life, given it a new platform, and helped it flourish. To comprehend and value artistic style in contemporary times, dialectical interpretation and the application of its fundamentals to the planning and production of modern art are necessary (29).

In the study of contemporary electronic literature titled, *Digital Modernism*, Jessica Pressman reveals that these works critique current culture and its dominant aesthetic standards, rather than celebrating everything new in new media. They do it by the process of transforming modernist aesthetic practises, concepts, and texts into new mediums. Digital modernist writers examine the situation of electronic literature, as well as literature in general, in the current digital age, and decide to deconstruct and reconstruct it. They seek modernist ways of envisioning, producing, and presenting literary work to achieve so. They reinterpret literary heritage in ways that make basic definitions of 'new' difficult to grasp. She rethinks how and why media is a crucial part of experimental writing and the method of making it new by applying the agenda of literary modernism, 'making it new', to contemporary media studies (30). Afghan women painters of today have made a significant contribution to contemporary art in this nation by drawing on the modernist principles and visual tradition's heritage. Modernism's influence on Afghan contemporary art has resulted in a greater participation of women in the arts than in the past. On their canvases or walls, women are increasingly beginning to paint portraits, landscapes, figures, inanimate nature, or formalistic artworks about political and feminine issues (31).

Major accounts of contemporary photography, visual art, and conceptual and post-conceptual art maintain their engagement with high modernism. Critical studies explore modernism's persistence in post-war and contemporary literature, major accounts of contemporary photography, visual art, and conceptual and post-conceptual art maintain their engagement with high modernism. In architecture, the modernist and neo-modernist styles are dominant. Popular culture, furniture design, interior and industrial design, fashion, and type design are all instances of modernism's contemporary significance. The current preference for modernist style could just as easily be interpreted as evidence of the postmodernism-associated dynamics of cultural recycling, nostalgia, and pastiche persisting. Whether in the realms of contemporary art, philosophical aesthetics, or literary studies, the modernist topic of aesthetic autonomy is once again on the critical

agenda. Self-referentiality and critical estrangement, as well as the material conditions that comprised modernism, compel contemporary culture to embrace modernism, not only to celebrate it as an aesthetic canon or an exemplary tradition of innovation but also to consider the contemporary status of problems. As a result, it calls for a greater presence of modernism (9). As a result, modernism would be the most prominent time in our divided and exuberant present, as well as the most startling moment upsetting the present.

A potential counter-argument could be that modernism being a literary movement that is marked in the history of literature as a period after the Victorian era and before post-modernism, how it is possible to speak about the contemporaneity of modernism. This study argues that the contemporaneity of modernism does not limit modernism to the compartmentalized periodic understanding of the literary movement, but as an aesthetical innovation which still strongly influences and engages contemporary art and literature. This study further states that this engagement was ever-present in the history of art and literature.

## Conclusion

In the contemporary literary world, modernism as an aesthetic novelty is always present. With the necessary presence of newness in the concept, the contemporary is obliged to rely on modernism as the frame that may assist it in establishing its own identity, which necessitates its repeated presence as an aesthetic intervention in the contemporary literary world. Furthermore, modernism interacts with contemporary developments in a variety of ways. Modernism is eternally present due to internal ruptures and fragmentation, as well as its antagonistic nature. Modernist studies today occasionally overstep their bounds, especially in their globalized forms. The foundation of a contemporary cultural logic that fosters continual self-evaluation and self-reflection is culture as reflexive modernity. As a stylistic mode, modernism becomes more dominant in the contemporary. In today's neoliberal capitalism, key components of modernist thinking and art reappear in contemporary situations to serve a specific purpose.

While continuing to experiment with form, contemporary writers are treating their literary inheritances in the same way that many modernists did. What it means to be contemporary is to engage in such re-engagements. The dialectical link between modernity and tradition is often overlooked by contemporary writers. Media is an important aspect of experimental writing, and the way of creating it new by applying the agenda of literary modernism to contemporary media studies is a significant part of it. Contemporary culture is compelled to embrace modernism, not only to celebrate it as an aesthetic canon or an exemplary tradition of innovation but also to consider the current status of problems, due to self-referentiality and critical estrangement. Thus, modernism's recurring presence is not a nostalgic, periodical reappearance, but rather a continual contemporaneity derived from its essence.

## Abbreviations

Nil

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Nil

## Author's contribution

Antony Jose conceived the idea, analysed the material, and prepared the original draft. Berlin Grace VM structured the manuscript. D David Wilson edited the manuscript and supervised the study.

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